

URAL-BATUR

A BASHKIR LEGEND

(translated by Sagit G. Shafikov)

Once upon a time, in the days of old, when there was no *Ural-tau** or the *Ak-Ithel**, in the impenetrable thickets lived an old man with his old woman. They had lived a long life, and then the old woman died leaving the old man with two children of tender age, Shulgan and Ural.

When their father went hunting, Shulgan and Ural stayed at home. The old man was so strong that it was no effort for him to catch a bear or a wolf, or a lion alive and drag the animal home. He developed a habit, before he set out hunting, to swallow a spoonful of a predator's blood. Once he did it he immediately became as strong as that predator.

According to custom, only a person who managed to catch a wild animal with his own hands had a right to do it. That was why the father never tired of explaining it to his sons, "Dare not follow my example, do not taste the blood from my blood-skin, you are too young and it will ruin you."

Once, when the old man was hunting, a beautiful young woman came up to the brothers and asked:

"Why are keeping the house instead of hunting with your father?"

Shulgan and Ural answered:

"We would like to, but our father won't let us do it. He says we are too young and leaves us at home."

The woman gave a laugh:

"How can one become mature keeping the house?"

"What shall we do then?"

"You must drink from the blood-skin. Once you do it, you will turn into strong *yegets**, as mighty as lions."

"Father has told us to keep back from the blood-skin and he warned us: 'Once you taste blood you will ruin yourselves.' We must obey our father."

But the woman persisted egging them on:

“Yes, you really are still babies to believe every word your father says. If you tasted that blood you would become mighty *batur** and go hunting. Then your father would have to keep the house. Your father is smart, he figured it out long ago, so he is putting up a good show drinking wild blood, and he won’t even show it to you. So it’s up to you to decide, I’ve just said my word,” — this is what the beautiful woman said and then disappeared.

Shulgan trusted her word and decided to taste the blood, while Ural who revered his father’s word kept back from the water-skin.

Once Shulgan swallowed the blood, he turned into a bear. At the same moment that beautiful woman reappeared and addressed Ural, laughing:

“See what your brother has done! Now I’ll change him into a wolf!”

She clicked her finger on the bear’s forehead and he turned into a wolf. Another click—and the wolf turned into a lion. Then she mounted the lion and raced off.

That beautiful woman was not a woman at all; she was a serpent who had changed her appearance; Shulgan fell a prey to her cunning and turned into an ever-changing beast: one look at him showed a bear, another look a wolf, or a lion. So he roamed about the forest until he got drowned in an unknown lake*.

His younger brother Ural grew into a *batur* who had no match. And it so happened that when he started hunting misfortune overtook the land: the rivers and lakes had dried up, all the greenery had withered and shriveled, and it was to breathe the sultry air, and pestilence befell both humans and animals. Nobody could offer any resistance against Azhal, Death, which roamed around devastating all that was still breathing.

Ural-*batur* began to think about how to find and kill Azhal. His father had a sword of damask, bequeathed to him by his own father, the sword that struck out lightings at every strike. The old man gave that sword to his son and said:

“You can kill anybody by this sword except Azhal, yet take it, to be on the safe side. They say that far away from here there is *Tere-hyu**, the Spring of Life. One drop of this spring-water can revive a sick or dead person and can kill Azhal. So Azhal must be washed in that water. There is no other way to escape that horrible creature.”

Ural took his father’s sword, fastened it to his belt and walked where his way led him. He walked on until he came to a crossroads of seven roads where he met an *ak-saqal**, a gray-bearded old man, and he asked him:

“*Babai**, which is the way to the Spring of Life?”

The old man pointed to one of the roads. Then Ural asked, "How long is the way there?"

"This question I cannot answer, son," said the old man. "I have been directing travelers to the Spring of Life forty years now, and I've never seen anyone come back safe and sound." Then he added:

"On your way there, my son, you will see a herd of horses, and among them *Akbuthat**, the white steed. Mount him, if you can, and speed along your way."

Ural said goodbye to the old man and took the way that led to the spring of Life. He walked on until he saw the herd the old man had told him about. Amid the herd

Sported Akbuthat, the white steed,
That had never known the bridle,
With his ears erect like reed-stems,
And his mane just like a maid's braid,
Round his breast was like a falcon's,
Light his hooves were, nicely rounded,
And his neck was like a serpent's,
With a double crown up, cheeks sunken,
And his nostrils—cloves of garlic,
Long his legs were, his flanks narrow,
And his eyes were like a wolf's eyes,
Like a flock of clouds his eyelids,
Like a bird that takes wing upward
He could tear along in whirlwinds.

Ural could not take his eyes off him, astounded, and then slowly approached the horse. Akbuthat gave him only one glance, and did not shrink back, scared, but stood still. Ural mounted him headlong and was just about to tear along, when the resentful Akbuthat tossed him so high that the rider, falling down, sank waist-deep in the ground. With great effort he made his way out and mounted Akbuthat again and clutched at him like a tick. Try as he would, Akbuthat could not throw him off. Then, infuriated, he rushed at full speed heaven knows where, with Ural on him, across boundless valleys, highest mountain-ridges, over gullies and along deep ravines. At last he stopped in the middle of wind-fallen trees. Ural jumped off in order to find out what was wrong. Then Akbuthat spoke in the human language, "We have reached a *dev** of nine heads that keeps barring the way to the Spring of Life. You will have to fight him. Tear three hairs out of my mane. Burn them, if

necessary, and I'll be back immediately." Ural tore three hairs out of his mane, and Akbuthat disappeared instantly.

As Ural stood trying to collect his wits, he saw a beautiful maid with a sack on her back, passing by. Ural stopped her and asked:

"Hey, *hylu**, where are you going? And what do you have in your sack, it looks rather heavy".

The maid told him about her grief, tears in her eyes. That maid, named *Kharaghash**, had been abducted by a dev and treated as a slave to entertain the nine children of the nine-headed dev. For that, she had to carry multicolored pebbles in a sack from a river reach.

Ural was sorry for the maid.

"Let me carry your sack, *hylu*", he offered his help, but the frightened maid objected:

"No, yeget, no, you mustn't come with me because if the dev should see you, he will kill you immediately!"

But Ural insisted and carried the sack to the playground where the children of the nine-headed dev were playing. As soon as he strewed the pebbles the dev's children began to pick them and enjoy themselves throwing pebbles at one another. While they were thus playing, Ural hung a large stone the size of a horse's head on an elm-tree bough and stalked up to the lair of the nine-headed dev.

Soon the dev's children ran short of their pebbles and gathered around the mysterious-looking large stone hung on a rope to an elm-tree bough. One of them pushed the stone, for fun, and it swung knocking the frolicsome fellow off. The child got up angrily and pushed the stone so violently that the stone swung a long way off and, on its way back, smashed his skull. The dev's other children killed themselves in the same way.

Before a dark cave, where a road cut through a mountain, the nine-headed dev was lying. Around him were heaps of human bones. As Ural saw the dev, he shouted from the distance:

"Hey, dev, get out of the way! I am going to the Spring of Life!"

The dev did not turn a hair. Ural-batur shouted again:

"Get out of the road, I tell you!"

Now the dev became angry and began to inhale the air to draw Ural-batur in, and the batur found himself near the dev at a moment's notice, but he was not daunted.

"Do you choose wrestling or fencing?" — he asked the dev.

The dev had seen many a brave yeget, but he knew that he was invulnerable and so he sneered at Ural:

“I don’t care which death you choose”.

Then they reached the highest mountain summit and came to grips in a single combat. They wrestled for hours, and at noon they were still wrestling without a pause, as neither could gain the upper hand. When the sun began to go down the dev managed to tear Ural off from the ground and hurled him up so high that he fell back sinking in the soil waist-deep. The dev pulled him and hurled him up again, and this time Ural sank neck-deep. The dev pulled him out by the ears and they came to grips again.

Now they were fighting in gathering dusk, and at one moment Ural seized the dev, conceited and bragging his force, and hurled him up with all his might. The dev fell back sinking in the soil waist-deep. Ural pulled him out, and they went on fighting. Then Ural hurled the dev high up again, so that the dev went neck-deep into the ground, all his nine heads looking blankly in different directions. After Ural pulled the dev out of the ground they carried on their battle. No sooner had the dev collected himself, than Ural-batur hurled him into the sky with such fury, and the dev hit the ground on his way back so hard that the earth swallowed him up. They say it was the dev’s doomsday.

Kharaghash came up the mountain to collect and bury the bones of the temerarious yeget, and when she saw him hale and hearty she burst into tears and asked him in amazement:

“Where is the dev?”

“I’ve turned him into earth,” answered Ural-batur.

A little way off a smoke was curling up, and then a blaze showed.

“What is it?” asked Kharaghash.

“This is where I nailed the dev into the ground, and the ground is probably averse to accepting that creature, the carrion is burning and smoking.

That mountain is still smoking, and that is why it is called *Yanghan-tau**.

After Ural-batur destroyed the dev, he did not linger on the mountaintop. He took out the three hairs, burned them and lo!—Akbut that appeared before him. Ural seated Kharaghash behind him and they sped off towards the Spring of Life.

They rode on and on across vast valleys, over rock and over mountain, and over bottomless ravines. Then Akbut that stopped and spoke to Ural in a human way, “We have approached the spring of live water guarded by a twelve-headed dev. You will have to fight him. Take three more hairs out of my mane. If you need me, burn them and I will instantly appear.”

Ural-batur tore off three hairs out of his horse's mane and told Kharaghash after Akbuthat had disappeared:

"Wait for me here. If I kill the dev I will come after you. I will leave this *kurai** with you. If I have good luck you will see milk drip from its end, if I am down on luck, you will see it blood-dripping".

Then he went toward the twelve-headed dev. Far ahead he saw the Spring of Life glistening. It was making its way out of the foot of a mountain and back into the mountain at the same spot. Around the spring were scattered piles of human bones. An old twelve-headed dev was guarding the spring, one drop of which could cure a sick person and make a healthy person immortal.

As Ural saw the dev, he shouted:

"Hey, dev, get out of the way, I have come for the Life-water!

The dev did not turn a hair, lying quietly by the spring.

"Get out of the way!" shouted Ural again, and this time the dev became angry; he turned a head towards the batur and began to inhale him. But the batur, undaunted, suggested:

"Do you choose wrestling or fencing?"

The dev had seen many a brave yeget ready to risk his head, and he said, nonchalantly:

"I don't care. Do as you are pleased to die".

"All right", said Ural-batur, as he unfastened his sword of damask and began brandishing it in the air making lightnings that almost blinded the dev.

"By this sword I will smite you!" said Ural-batur and began to slash the dev. He slashed him right and left, and with every strike off went one of the heads of the monster.

At that time Kharaghash saw milk dripping from the end of the *kurai*, and as she saw it she was beside herself with joy.

But soon, hearing the dev's heart-rending roaring smaller devs and *azhdaha-serpents** came running over to his assistance. But Ural-batur would not give in, his mighty legs of a giant standing firm upon the ground, as if they were planted, his head high up, nearly touching the clouds, with the sword of damask in his hand striking lightnings.

When Ural-batur slashed dead all the devs and serpents, a black cloud of genies and *peris** attacked him and swarmed around him so that it was unbearable. That was the moment when Kharaghash saw blood dripping from the *kurai*'s end. At first she grieved, and then she put the *kurai* to her lips and began to play an unpleasant, devilish melody. That was what the genies and *peris* wanted: when they heard their kin melody they forgot all what they

were doing and, leaving Ural alone, they rushed where the sound of the kurai was heard and started an inconceivably weird devilish dance, screaming and screeching.

Then Ural-batur assured himself that he was through with all the evil force in the world and that he would eventually give the magic water long guarded by the devs to human beings to make mankind immortal, and so he walked to the spring. But the spring had dried up, and there was not a drop of the water of life. It happened because the genies and peris who survived in the battle drank it to the last drop so that man should not have any. Long and vainly did Ural-batur sit by the spring; he could not get a drop of magic water.

Ural-batur grieved a lot. But his having crushed down devs and peris made a wonderful effect: life was back again in the green color of trees and grass, in the singing of birds and joy on the faces of people.

Ural-batur mounted Akbuthat with Kharaghash in front of him and left the dried spring. A great mountain sprang from the dead bodies of devs, genies and peris that Ural-batur had slashed into pieces. People called that mountain *Yaman-tau**.

Ural married Kharaghash and created a united family. They had three sons: *Ithel**, the first, *Yaik**, the second, and *Hakmar**, the third and youngest son.

Azhal seldom haunted those parts, afraid of Ural and his sword of damask that struck a lightning at every stroke. The people multiplied and began to run short of fresh water. Ural saw the desperate situation of his people and drew his sword, waved it thrice over his head and cleft the earth deep down.

“Here will be the source of Big Water!” he declared. And he called his elder son Ithel and told him:

“Go, my son, where your heart calls you. Roam around the people until you come across a large river.”

Ithel, a giant man, like his father, went south, leaving giant tracks behind him. For a long time his father followed him with his eyes full of tears knowing that Ithel would never come back home.

On and on trudged Ithel without stopping to rest till he swerved to the right and went north. It took him months and years to walk like that before he turned west. Finally he came on a full-flowing river where *kama-otters** were swarming. Ithel turned his head backward and saw a white stream behind him that flowed into the full-flowing river edged by rushes.

That was how the beautiful Ak-Ithel* river was born.

On the day when Ithel set out on his one-way journey his father gave the same commission to his other sons, but they turned out to be less determined and more impatient. They did not have courage enough to take such a painful long journey as Ithel did. Thus, Hakmar, the youngest brother began to feel sad in his solitude as soon as he left his native place. "Why should I roam about all alone in a strange land? I think I'll find my brother Yaik and make him company. Faring together is easier and more fun."

Thus he fared forth in search of Yaik, who, accidentally, swerved from the South direction to the West, as his brother would have liked him to, and soon they met in the great steppe. Then they went forth together till they came on a great lake in the plain*.

Anyway, people are grateful not only to Ithel, but to Yaik and Hakmar. They sang praises to Ural-batur who had raised such sons and wished him a long life and good health.

Ural, who had turned 101 years old, was going to meet his death soon. Azhal, who had long been waiting for him to grow old, was quite near him.

Ural-batur lay on his death-bed. His people grieved and mourned him before parting with their glorious and noble batur. At this time, a middle-aged stranger made his way through the crowd of mournful people to Ural's death-bed and said in this wise: "O Ural, the most glorious batur! On the day when you took to your bed I, at the request of the people, fared to the Spring of Life, to which once you fought your way by crushing hosts of devs and peris. Oddly enough, it has not dried up yet, so I collected a horn of live water, drop by drop. And now on behalf of the nation I give you this water. Drink this water, our father Ural and live for ever so that the people may be joyous and happy!"

And he handed him the horn of live water.

"Drink to the last drop!" the people begged.

Slowly, painfully Ural sat up and took the horn with his right hand. He thanked the people and filled his mouth with the live water. But not a drop of the precious liquid did he drink; instead, he turned right and left, back and forth and sprinkled the water all over and said in this wise: "I am one and you are many. Instead of me, let the land and the water be immortal, let the people live on earth in joy and happiness!"

Scarcely had he thus spoken, when all things around them underwent a sudden and miraculous alteration: all the green bloomed up, revived; emerald grass spread forth beneath everyone's feet; trees arrayed themselves in new foliage; juicy red berries ripened on the ground, and so did red fruit on the trees; fragrant flowers opened up in bloom dazzling the eye with beauty; birds of fine feather came fluttering and singing; rills broke through filling the air

with their crystalline sound; round lakes filled up, girded by thick rushes; nameless streams which were feeding those lakes, as well as Agithel and Yaik, bore afloat snow-white birds of feather, yet unseen—these were swans, and there were gulls cleaving the air above them, squealing.

Who would have forborne to come and live in that glamorous world!

A ninety-year-old *sasan** stepped forward from the crowd and, ascending a hillock, he sang thus:

Sweetest haven, o my home-land!
Sacred land of our forefathers,
And to wild-life beasts of four legs
Land of shelter and their home-land!
My home's vales are like a soft bed,
Where a cherry hugs a willow,
Where cow-parsnip is enormous,
And white lilies form an orchard,
Various colors are the flowers,
Giving up a luscious fragrance!
Far-extended is my sweet land,
Where the awkward bear is waddling—
Thus it is, my lovèd home-land;
Tracking prey, the wolves are prowling—
Thus it is, my goodly home-land;
Cone-eared short-tailed hares are countless—
Thus it is, my lavish home-land;
Lissome foxes, bright-appareled—
Thus it is, my fathers' homeland;
Where fish struggle and sport like horses
In the num'rous water-courses—
That it is, my pleasant home-land,
Native land where dwelt my fathers,
Where strong horses neigh out loudly,
Where, as one, kine bellow loudly,
Where, as one, sheep bleat in huge flocks—
Thus it is, lo!—'Tis my land!
Where a ewe lays down her body,
Five score lambs she there delivers;
Where a lingering mare lies sprawling
There a hundred foals surround her,

Where my father was a bridegroom
To his bride that was my mother,
Where I had my navel-string cut,
Where I tasted the sweet waters
Of my sweet abundant home-land!

Thus marveling at the treasures and beauty of his native land the old sasan composed his *kubair*.

It was at that time that Ural-batur passed away.

The people held a great funeral ceremony ere they interred their batur at a height. Each one of the rally tossed a handful of ground over his grave.

Days, months and years passed by, but the people never ceased visiting this sacred place, every one tossing a little ground until Ural's grave turned into an enormous mountain. The people called it Ural-tau ("Mount of Ural"). They say, the remains of Ural-batur are still there. One needs only to make a good dig to unearth innumerable amounts of gold and silver, various precious stones. There are the inexhaustible remains of Ural-batur. Not only his precious stones have remained intact; his blood, too, is still warm. Only its color has changed in the course of long time: what is now named *the oil of earth** is Ural-batur' ever-warm and ever-lasting blood.

GLOSSARY

- *A great lake in the plain* — the Caspian Sea
- *Ak-Ithel* — the name of the major river in Bashkortostan; in Bashkir Ak-Ithel stands for "white-river"
- *Akbuthat* (*Akbuth*) — literally "white-grey"; the name of the famous winged horse of Bashkir legends
- *Ak-saqal* — a wise old man; in Bashkir: "white beard"
- *An unknown lake* — Lake Shulgan
- *Azhal* — in Bashkir this word stands for "death"
- *Azhdaha* — an evil-doing giant serpent frequently occurring in Turkic fairy-tales
- *Babai* — a respectful way of addressing a senior male stranger; literally in Bashkir: "grandfather"
- *Batur* — a brave man; a man of great personal strength
- *Dev* — a popular creature of the epic legends and fairy tales of the Middle and Central East — an ugly, huge, hairy, fabulously strong monster that can fly in the air and is capable of magic
- *Hakmar and Yaik* — names of two smaller rivers in comparison with the Ak-Ithel, the major river
- *Ithel* — see *Ak-Ithel*

- *Kama-otters* — the name of River Kama is associated with the legend according to which otters used to abound in the river's mouth
- *Kubair* — a verse; a poem; poetry
- *Kurai* — a Bashkir wind instrument traditionally made of a long hollow reed
- *Oil of earth* — petroleum, oil
- *Peri* – in Turkic folklore, an evil female demon believed to eat human flesh; a succubus
- *Sasan* — a Bashkir traditional folk singer; a bard
- *Tere-hyu* — Spring of Life; in Bashkir “live water”
- *Ural-tau* — one of the mountains in the Urals where, as legend has it, the remains of Ural-batur, an outstanding folk hero, lie buried
- *Yaman-tau* — literally “Evil Mountain”; a massif in the South Urals.
- *Yanghan-tau* – literally “Burnt Mountain”; a mountain in the South Urals; now also a popular sanatorium.
- *Yeget* — a young man; a brave; a brave, temerarious man

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